Feb. 20th

George Charles Devol Jr.

(pronounced de-VAHL)

Born: Feb. 20, 1912;

Louisville, Kentucky
Died: Aug. 11, 2011

At various times, Devol has been called the father, grandfather, and even great-grandfather of industrial robotics.

He's best known for developing Unimate, the first material handling robot employed in industrial production [Dec 10], although he was a prolific inventor in several fields. His last patent was granted when he was 98-years old.

Unimate was the first of many industrial robots made at Unimation, the first robotics company (1958), set up by Devol and Joseph Engelberger who managed the business side. Engelberger met Devol at a Westport cocktail party in 1956, where the two discussed Isaac Asimov's [Jan 2] robot stories.

The Phantom Doorman. Photo by William Wardlow.

One of Devol's first inventions was the automatic photoelectric door, later manufactured as the "Phantom Doorman". Devol was also part of the team that developed the first commercial use of microwave oven technology, the "Speedy Weeny", which automatically cooked and dispensed hotdogs in places such as Grand Central station.

Kenneth Harry Olsen

Born: Feb. 20, 1926;

Bridgeport, Connecticut
Died: Feb. 6, 2011

Olsen co-founded Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) with Harlan Anderson on [Aug 23] 1957. Under Olsen's leadership, DEC became the second largest computer company in the world at its peak.

Olsen had previously worked at MIT, leading the Lincoln Lab section that designed and built the Memory Test Computer (MTC) used by SAGE [June 26]. He also supervised the construction of the early transistorized computers, the TX-0 [Nov 20] and TX-2 [Feb 26].

As a student, Olsen had helped fit the Whirlwind [April 20] with core memory, replacing its unreliable vacuum tubes. He later worked at the Office of Naval Research on a computerized flight simulator, and during WWII served in the navy and became an accomplished pilot.

At DEC, Olsen was known for his paternalistic management style and dislike of the excessive trappings of seniority. He kept a simple office in DEC's old mill building and when the company built him a modern, expensive replacement, he refused to use it.

In 1977 at a World Future Society meeting in Boston, Olsen made a fateful, off-the-cuff remark: "There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his home." He later explained that his words had been taken out of context and that he was referring to computers being used to automate houses. However, on another occasion, he had stated: "The personal computer will fall flat on its face in business."

In retrospect, DECs decline can be seen in large part due to its missing out on the importance of PCs. In July 1992, the company's board forced Olsen to resign

In 1987 he gave the first of his infamous UNIX "snake oil speeches". However, they weren't criticizing UNIX so much as UNIX vendors for making exaggerated claims about the OS being able to solve all manner of compatibility issues.

Alan Turing Talks

Feb. 20, 1947

Alan Turing [June 23] gave a lecture at the London Mathematical Society which brought together his ideas on Universal machines, hardware, and AI.

At one point, Turing stated that "digital computing machines such as the ACE... [Feb 19] are in fact practical versions of the Universal machine," i.e. the Turing machine [Nov 12]. He also suggests testing AI by having it play chess, but only after training.

Conspiracy 8 Debuts

Feb. 20, 1970

"Conspiracy 8" was a musical project conceived by composer Gordon Mumma and MIT PhD student Stephen Smoliar. It was perhaps the first example of the real-time collaboration of a group of performers with a computer (a PDP-6 [Dec 00]).

It premiered on this day in the AI Lab at MIT, with Mumma playing a musical saw accompanied by clicks generated by the PDP-6. Smoliar was sat at a teletype linked to the computer, sending it commands, and "Conspiracy 8" responded by generating clicking sounds and teletype print-out about what the performer could do next.

The human had the option to obey or reject the suggestions. Indeed, this last step (termed "assent or dissent") was an integral element of the project, which Mumma modeled on the recent "Conspiracy Eight" trial in Chicago; hence, the name of the piece.

Smoliar 's input was processed by a special version of Joseph Weizenbaum's [Jan 8] ELIZA, modified to understand and use a more relevant vocabulary.

"Conspiracy 8" was presented again at New York's Guggenheim Museum as part of a series of "new music" concerts in March 1970, with a larger group of performers, and without the computer's clicking accompaniment. Smoliar now sent messages to the PDP-6 via a modem and telephone link.

The Sept. 1969 "Conspiracy Eight" trial was of eight people involved in anti-Vietnam War and countercultural protests. Charges were later dropped against one of the men, forcing a change of the name to "Conspiracy Seven". The trial group was also known as the "Chicago Eight" (later "Seven"), and the subject of a movie in 2020.

The Origin of Geek

Feb. 20, 1984

The old meaning of "Geek" is derived from the Low German word "geck", meaning a "fool" or "fop". This form was most famously used by Shakespeare in "Twelfth Night" (1602), when Malvolio complains of having been made 'the most notorious gecke and gull'.

In English, "geek" has increasingly been used to describe people with eccentric or non-mainstream behaviors, and has come to mean a person obsessed with a hobby or intellectual pursuit, with an accompanying lack of social skills. For example, Jack Kerouac wrote in Oct 1957: "Brooklyn College wanted me to lecture to eager students and big geek questions to answer."

In America, the word also had a specialized sense, referring to a circus or carnival performer who engaged in outrageous acts on stage, such as biting the heads off live animals. For example, it was prominently used in this way in the 1947 movie "Nightmare Alley", starring Tyrone Power. It was also applied in that sense by Bob Dylan, in his "Ballad of a Thin Man" (1965), which talks about a Mr. Jones handing in his ticket to 'go watch the geek'.

Malvolio as depicted in the Typhoo Tea card series, "Characters From Shakespeare" (1905).

By the start of the 1980's, the obsession part had started to coalesce around computers, and began to lose some of its negative associations. This could be seen for example in the treatment of the Anthony Michael Hall character in 1984's "Sixteen Candles". The USENET newsgroup net.jokes of Feb. 20, 1984 featured: "I was a lonely young computer geek with a program due most every week."

For the origin of "nerd", see [Oct 8].

The Technophobe and the Madman

Feb, 20, 2001; 8pm

The first live distributed musical, "The Technophobe and the Madman", was broadcast from two stages at the New York University (NYU) and the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), separated by 162 miles. The show lasted around 40 minutes.

The stages were connected by six channels of video and twelve channels of audio which allowed all the actors to be seen and heard by the audiences in both theaters.

The show utilized Internet2 [Oct 27], a 100 Gbit/s network backbone run by a consortium of US research and educational institutions. Nevertheless, there was a round-trip latency of about 0.5 secs, which made it very difficult for the musicians at the two sites to play rhythmic material together. In separate experiments by Nathan Schuett, it was found that a distributed group could only effectively collaborate when the latency was below 30 ms.

The musical was a collaboration of three composers (Nick Didkovsky, Neil Rolnick, and Robert Rowe), a video artist (Don Ritter), two writers (Tyrone Henderson and Quimetta Perle), and a theatrical director (Valeria Vasilevski).

Udacity Launched

Feb. 20, 2012

Udacity is a for-profit educational organization founded by Sebastian Thrun [May 14], David Stavens, and Mike Sokolsky, which offers online courses (MOOCs [Sept 15]). The venture grew out of the free online computer science classes made by Stanford University, which attract ten of thousands of students.

The Udacity name reflects the company's desire to be "audacious for you, the student".

The first two courses offered were "CS 101: Building a Search Engine", taught by David Evans from the University of Virginia, and "CS 373: Programming a Robotic Car" taught by Thrun. Although they attracted millions of viewers, the retention rates were poor, and the typical person who made it to the end was someone who already had a bachelor degree.

In recent years, Udacity has moved away from offering university-style courses, towards vocational programmes aimed at professionals.

Thrun first became interested in MOOCs when he attended a talk by Sal Khan about his Khan Academy [Nov 16]. Thrun later remarked, "I was a fully tenured Stanford professor . . . and here's this guy who teaches millions. It was embarrassing."

Udacity was one of three MOOCs [Sept 15] created in 2012, the others being Coursera [April 18] and MIT edX [May 2].